
Alumni Publications

Winter 2004

Surprises in Caregiving

Charles D. Dolph

Cedarville University, dolphc@cedarville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/alumni_publications



Part of the [Geriatric Nursing Commons](#), and the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dolph, Charles D., "Surprises in Caregiving" (2004). *Alumni Publications*. 200.
http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/alumni_publications/200

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in Alumni Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@cedarville.edu.

Surprises in Caregiving

Chuck Dolph '74

Surprises. There are always surprises. Usually they are losses, but occasionally unexpected joys. It may be how badly your father drives, how confused your mother is, how little they are eating, or their failure to recognize your son. It may have been a surprise like this that started your sojourn in caregiving. Caregiving is a labor of love fraught with losses and stress that may turn out to be one of the most important accomplishments in your life.

One of the most stressful yet revealing aspects of caregiving is role reversal — when you become your parent's parent. It is stressful because neither you nor your parent wants it, at least not in the beginning. There are likely to be many power struggles. Your parents will tell you to butt out and insist that they are quite capable of driving, handling their checkbook, preparing their own meals — after all, they were doing those things before you were even born. For you to suggest otherwise, they will say, is bossy and arrogant of you. They will either shame you or try to avoid you in order to prevent you from taking over their lives. You may find yourself having the same arguments with your parents that you have with your teenagers who are asserting their independence. Your parents do not want to be dependent any more than you do. They resist you, not because they do not love you, but because they feel like they are fighting for their lives.

Role reversal is stressful because it requires humility on both your parts. Your parents are ashamed that they cannot take care of themselves and need help. As they develop humility, role reversal and caregiving will become easier. The first time you see your parent naked and have to change or bathe him or her, you will experience shame (remember Noah's sons), loss, and grief. Something inside of you changes, and you know your role in your parent's life and the world has changed forever. Changing the diaper of the parent who changed your diaper changes you. It is a humbling rite of passage into a new and unwanted parenthood. In your parent you get a glimpse of your own future. In parenting your parent you get a glimpse of who you have become.

Role reversal is an emotional experience because it reveals your limits. Exhaustion and depression signal your physical and emotional limits. Your parent's frustration and anger reveal your limited ability to please them. Their continued decline reveals



your inability to change the situation or remedy their illness. Recognizing these limits, however, may humble you and remind you that your relationship with your parent is much more important than your strength, finances, or power. Working out your relationship with your parent may be the most difficult yet important emotional accomplishment of your life.

Role reversal and caregiving are especially difficult if you have had a troubled relationship with your parent. Parenting a parent who neglected or abused you is a very challenging labor of love, assuming the parental role gives you the power to neglect and abuse back. When your parent is difficult, uncooperative, or unrepentant, you may be tempted to teach them how it feels to be treated badly. But, it is also an opportunity

to stop the generational cycle of dysfunction. It is an opportunity to demonstrate that you have grown beyond your past, your pain, and your parents.

Parenting your parents may be the hardest challenge of your life, but it is also an opportunity to prove that you love unconditionally. It is an opportunity to honor your parents. It is an opportunity to give without an expectation of reward. It is an opportunity to learn that material things are not the most important things. Remember that as you parent your parents, God parents you. You did not get to choose your parents or the outcome of their lives. They are a stewardship to you from God.

Surprises. Sometimes the surprises are unexpected joys. It might be the nurse telling you how much your father appreciates you. It might be your mother perfectly quoting "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" in the fog of her dementia. It might be your father taking your hand and whispering, "You're a pretty good girl." It might be God saying, "Well done. In honoring your parents you honored Me."

Chuck Dolph has been a psychology professor at Cedarville University for 25 years. He spends the weekends in nursing homes with elderly, sick, and dying residents and consults with families on the emotional stresses of caregiving. Chuck resides in Cedarville with his wife, Teresa (Brown) '83, and children, Emanuel '06 and Olivia '08.